

VZCZCXYZ0001  
RR RUEHWEB

DE RUEHVI #1710 3261532  
ZNR UUUUU ZZH  
R 211532Z NOV 08  
FM AMEMBASSY VIENNA  
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 1428  
INFO RUEHZL/EUROPEAN POLITICAL COLLECTIVE  
RUEHAH/AMEMBASSY ASHGABAT 0403

UNCLAS VIENNA 001710

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: N/A  
TAGS: [ENRG](#) [EPET](#) [ECON](#) [AU](#) [TX](#)  
SUBJECT: Turkmeni Visit Promotes Energy Agenda

11. SUMMARY: The recent visit by Turkmeni President Berdymuchammedow has boosted Austria's efforts to promote a "Southern Corridor" to access Caspian Basin gas and oil, overshadowing human rights issues. END SUMMARY.

Berdymuchammedow and Co. Take Vienna by Storm  
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12. On November 17, Turkmeni President Gurbanguly Berdymuchammedow -- with a delegation that various press reports pegged between 50 and 140 persons -- made a high-profile first official visit to Vienna. In addition to Austrian President Heinz Fischer, he met with leading members of the outgoing government (FinMin Molterer, ForMin Plassnik, and EconMin Bartenstein) and with the leadership of Austrian oil/gas company OMV. Berdymuchammedow also signed at least two agreements: a general MOU on political and economic cooperation (with President Fischer) and an MOU on cooperation between the Austrian MinEcon and its Turkmeni counterpart ministry. At a press conference, Berdymuchammedow praised the "very good negotiations" and said the talks were "only positive." On human rights, Fischer said he had asked the GOT to permit the Red Cross to operate in country.

13. Economic talks highlighted energy while covering broader areas for cooperation. Besides oil and gas, the GOA cited environmental technology, agricultural processing, health care/pharmaceuticals, construction, telecoms, consulting, and tourism as areas where it would like to deepen ties. The MOU reportedly covers seminars, trade missions, and the recent creation of a "Austria-Turkmenistan Economic Forum" to encompass a number of Austrian companies.

COMMENT: Red Carpet Diplomacy  
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14. Like others in the region, Austrian interlocutors see Turkmenistan and a trans-Caspian gas pipeline as key to getting a deal with Turkey on the southern corridor / Nabucco. The successful handling of this visit -- which crowded out press mention of Turkmenistan's human rights record -- is another reason for OMV's guarded optimism that Nabucco will be launched in the coming months.

GIRARD-DICARLO